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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000300

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TAGS: KDEM KWMM PGOV SL

SUBJECT: ELECTORAL PRESSURE BEGINS IN SIERRA LEONE

Classified By: AMBASSADOR PERRY REASONS 1.4 B/D

(C) Summary: Rumors and news reports of candidate harassment prior to Sierra Leone's July 5 local elections appear accurate. USG, UN and NDI employees met with female candidates in the country's Northeastern region where they heard reports of intimidation from several female candidates. Disturbing threats of house burning and personal attacks by the country's Vice President or his henchman in the ruling All Peoples Congress, (APC) gives pause to the government's stated objection of equity and democracy. There were also reports that former Vice President Berewa's car was attacked by youth. Strategic action by the international community is under way by the U.S. and UK Chiefs of Mission as well as by the UN's Special Representative. The independent Political Party's Registration Commission (PPRC) held a June 19 press conference condemning the incidents and called for peaceful elections. Ambassador Perry met with Vice President Summana June 19 to protest the treatment of candidates and urged the GoSL to speak out. What is so far lacking is government leadership from the top to quell the tensions. END OF SUMMARY

Candidate Intimidation in Kono

2.(C) Following a spate of newspaper reports of candidate harassment, NDI's team leader gave post's USAID contractor a heads up late June 15 that a scheduled women's debate the next day could be accompanied by threats or retaliatory action directed at participants. Embassy, NOI and UN representatives traveled to the Northern section of Kono June 16 to show visible international support for the female candidates. They were told that current GoSL Vice President Samuel Sam Summana, who has ties to Kono, had been in the region over the weekend and had allegedly told his people to threaten independent female candidates with rape, house burning, and killing of family members. Also threatened were paramount chiefs who were ordered to abandon their allegiance to the ousted Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) or lose their authority. The women also related that the sister of Sierra Leone's First Lady, who comes from Kono, issued threats as well.

¶3. (C) The presence of foreign observers encouraged women to go through with the broadcast debate. However, fear of retaliation kept the women from returning to their homes late in the day. Most disturbing are the repeated reports of the Vice President's involvement in this district that faced violence during the 2007 National Elections. The Vice President denied such involvement in June 19 discussions with Ambassador Perry, said he supported "the rule of lawa" and that he would have the Sierra Leonean Police follow up on the reported cases.

Planning a Strategy to Diffuse Tensions

¶4. (C) To begin mapping out a strategy to urge GoSL President Koroma to take a leadership stand, Ambassador met June 17 with the UK High Commissioner. The proposed plan, discussed with the UN's Special Representative Michael v.der Schulenburg the same day is to have a public statement on UN radio and in the press emphasizing peaceful and free elections. The core donor group (U.S., UK, EC and UN) will seek an urgent meeting with President Koroma when he is in town. Consequently, the U.S. funded Political Parties Registration Commission (PPRC) is working in all electoral districts to counter act potential harassment of candidates and to encourage them to stay in the race. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) Chair, Christiana Thorpe is aware of the situation and told DCM she will consider her actions after reports from the Political Party's Registration Commission (PPRC) which has the legal mandate to monitor the conduct of the political parties.

PPRC Condemns Violence

¶5. (U) On June 19 the PPRC held a press conference to express concern about the "confirmed reports" of the incidents in Kono, which had been reported to them by various sources, including written complaints from those intimidated. The PPRC Acting Chairman Roland Ceasar emphasized the need for a peaceful election and announced that the PPRC would be traveling on June 20 to Kono on a fact finding mission (note: the trip is being facilitated by UNIOSIL).

¶6. (U) Ceasar reaffirmed the importance of maintaining a
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level playing field and he tasked the press to sensitize the public to the need for a peaceful electoral process. The PPRC press release called upon political party members "to cease and desist from such unacceptable conduct We have come a long way from venting our feelings through violence. The PPRC condemns all actions that are likely to disrupt the peaceful conduct of the forthcoming local council elections."

While the message was generally well received, SLPP and APC party members present clashed verbally during the question period.

Comment

¶7. (C) The Kono area was the site of some violence during the 2007 National Elections. It will be critical for the current government to speak out against intimidation and harassment. Institutions set up to diffuse tensions, such as the PPRC have a key role to play and it is encouraging to see that they are speaking out. We note that the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) Inspector General has announced that he will make a week-long tour of the country to deliver the message that violence will not be tolerated. This suggests that the Vice President did follow up on our conversation as he had promised. However, it would be helpful for the President to step forward and make a similar public statement, particularly to encourage his party followers to respect the independence of all candidates and voters. The APC ran on a platform that emphasized the Sierra Leone's need for democratic governance and a break with the previous regime. Adherence to those promises is essential to the GoSL's credibility. End comment.

PERRY